

10 things (so far) that organisations say when they are criticised by journalists and don't want to deal with the issues raised

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The [BBC Panorama on charities](#) was not a devastating deconstruction of the sector. It showed that a few (big name) charities are not entirely as ethical as they pretend; that they tend to be rather generous to departing staff (something the BBC should know about); they are potentially swayed by corporate donors; and are not entirely transparent about their investments in guns, drugs and booze. There were real issues raised, but it was hardly on a par with pension mis-selling or phone-hacking. So how did the organisations involved respond to the legitimate criticisms?

[panorama](#)

Some of the charities engaged with the criticism on screen, Comic Relief did not, thought it [promised to review its finances](#). So there was definitely a case to answer, which is exactly what journalism is supposed to do.

More revealing about the sector, however, was the defensive tweeting by several charity executives who felt that *any* criticism was unjustified. They were, of course, saying the same things that everyone says when they are subjected to journalistic attention. Bankers, politicians, football managers, even newspaper editors and, ahem, universities. But it seems a few people who work in the 'ethical' sector feel that because they do something 'good' they should not be questioned. They are not alone. Here's a handy cut-out-and-keep guide – you may have further examples.

10 things that people say whenever they are criticised by journalists and don't want to deal with the issues raised

1. *'Don't look at that, look over there!'* You are criticising us for this one bad thing but look at all the good stuff we do...
2. Variation of above: *'Look at the rest of what we do, this is a tiny part of our activities.'* (The Police/Media organisation metaphor for this syndrome is: 'bad apples')
3. *'This report is sensationalist'* – i.e. you have made a programme that people might want to watch
4. *'Why aren't you reporting on the other much worse evils in the world?'* This is a strange one. So all journalists should only ever investigate the few very worst things in the world? I guess, plague, famine, war and rape? Well, there goes local news, to start with.*
5. *'You have an agenda'*. This means, 'you have actually thought this one through and realised that the problem is systematic'
6. *'Your source has an agenda'*. (see above – it means, how dare you take someone seriously who thinks differently from us about our work)
7. *'Why do you always focus on the bad news?'* Where does one start? How about, because that's what audiences care about. Because good news would take 500 times longer to list. When things go wrong, people are let down. That's why it matters. It's the exception, but then so is journalism.
8. *'We will review this'*. Good response, actually. Let's hope the journalists will have the time to come back in a year

to see if you've changed in practice.

9. *'We believe in accountability, that's why we have all these systems in place. Have a look at our glossy annual report'*. Again, good response. That's great. Then why not look at the criticisms and respond to them? Why not publish everything in that report?

*10. The BBC-related version of this is – *'why waste licence fee payers' money on investigating people trying to do good?'* The answer is that the BBC gives charities like Save The Children, Amnesty, Comic Relief etc vast amounts of free air-time – usually entirely uncritically – so to spend 30 minutes once a year on a programme that makes a few criticisms seems like the very least they could do to maintain their own credibility.

More excuses to all to the list welcome.

Update:

Good piece from NGO marketing expert Matthew Sherrington on [the realities of brand reputation management here](#)

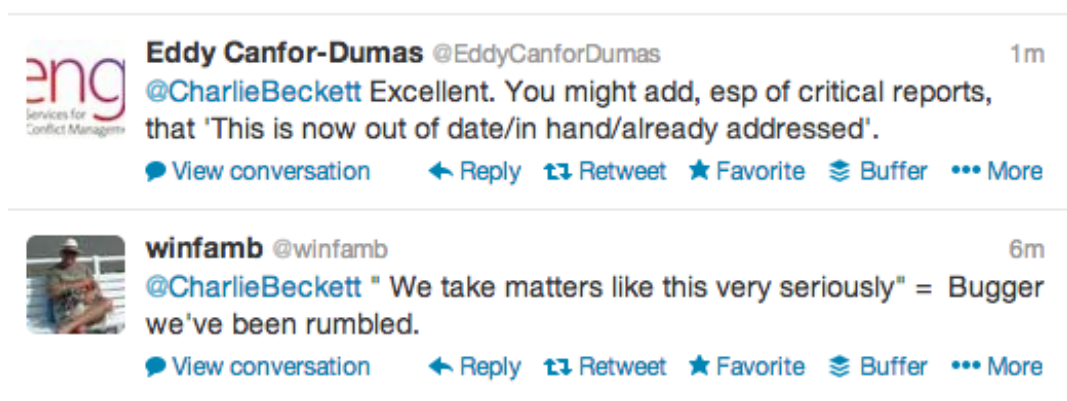
Duncan Green from Oxfam reminds us of the [five standard UK civil service excuses](#) as explained here by Sir Humphrey in Yes Minister!. As usual funny but true.

See Comments below for some crackers already.





Also these from Twitter from people too lazy to post a comment on the blog



And thanks to the wonderful @MonaChalabi at the Guardian's data desk for this outstanding piece of graphic visualisation:

